

## Trees & Livestock Can Grow Together - the background behind the West Highland Woodland Grazing Project—Lucy Sumsion Argyll FWAG



Argyll Woodland - photo by Ramtops

Over the last ten years there has been increasing recognition of the important role grazing livestock can play in encouraging natural regeneration and enhancing the biodiversity value of woodlands. In addition, as many farmers will acknowledge woodlands can also provide livestock with important shelter that benefits and helps to sustain the whole farm enterprise. During 2005 Argyll FWAG has been involved in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland, SEERAD, Scottish agricultural College, Scottish Native Woods and Scottish Natural Heritage in promoting both the conservation and economic value of woodland grazing through the West Highland Woodland Grazing Project (WHWGP). The project has been operating under the umbrella of the Argyll & Bute Biodiversity Partnership.

The announcement in November 2004 by the Forestry Commission Scotland of the new Stewardship Grant (S9) for Controlled Livestock Grazing in Woodlands has been a major step forward and was welcomed by many, both farmers and conservationists. This Grant will contribute towards the costs of establishing and maintaining woodland conservation grazing schemes.

If the Pilot scheme can demonstrate that conservation grazing in woodlands can be successfully incorporated into a mainstream funding mechanism (such as Tier 3 of Land Management Contracts) there could be significant environmental, economic and social gain achieved. It would certainly help in securing the sustainability of some farms and crofts. The WHWGP project sought to demonstrate that livestock can be regarded as another forest product and that woodlands can be managed to optimise production of a wide range of products with follow-on benefits to the local economy.

Following the Scottish Executive WGS/FWPS Review (Scottish Executive 2002), the Forestry Commission launched the new Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme (SFGS) in 2003. Conservation grazing in woodlands, however, had not been included as a management option. The WGS/FWPS Review Report had stated that “to engineer an integrated support scheme covering SAP, forage Area and SFGS:FP type support would be enormously complicated.” It would appear that it is for this reason that no management options, and consequently no payment rates, were drawn up under SFGS. At present the rules of the Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS) state that the Management of Native or Semi-Natural Woodland is eligible only where Forestry Commission assistance is not appropriate to the site. Although we have seen the introduction of the Wood Pasture Management Prescription under RSS this is limited to a number of recognised sites. The reality is that very few woodland sites are considered ineligible for SFGS assistance and hence conservation grazing of native woodlands is not being pursued as a management option under RSS. Up until the launch of the Pilot S9 Stewardship Grant SFGS was not able to grant support woodland grazing either. So conservation woodland grazing was in effect excluded from any grant funding mechanism.

It was for this reason that the rationale for the West Highland Woodland Grazing Project was drawn up. The project aimed to demonstrate how farming and forestry objectives could be integrated in a totally new and innovative way.

In February 2004 the WHWGP held a Woodland Grazing Workshop in Argyll. One of the main outcomes

from that workshop was recognition of the biodiversity benefits of woodland grazing and a rallying call for a more integrated and holistic approach to farm and woodland management. One year on, in March 2005, a second workshop was held in Argyll, with over 100 people attending; farmers, crofters, land managers, foresters, advisers, researchers, conservationists and agency staff from SNH, SEERAD and FCS. This year saw delegates coming from all over Scotland with some also traveling from south of the border.

The aim of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Woodland Grazing Workshop was to give participants the opportunity to find out more about both the science and practice of managing woodlands with livestock. This event gave more practical information and advice and promoted the sharing of experiences and information relevant to the role of livestock in woodland management.

2005 was an extremely active one for the WHWGP; I believe that the WHWGP has been instrumental in influencing the development of the Pilot stewardship grant, we have held two successful workshops and subsequently produced proceedings for both, we have undertaken a field-based review of woodland grazing sites in Argyll & Lochaber and produced two newsletters currently with a distribution list of over 500 names. A draft woodland grazing toolkit has now been produced. It is intended that this will be used by advisers who are involved in drawing up Grazing Plans under the S9 Pilot for Controlled Livestock Grazing in Woodlands. Alongside the development of the Toolkit, Meg Pollock from SAC has been developing appropriate monitoring protocols for the S9 Pilot. The monitoring procedures that have been drawn up will assist in assessing the effectiveness of a grazing regime within a woodland habitat mosaic. One of the guiding principles for the development of the monitoring protocols was that they should be an aid to the farmer or land manager in making decisions about stocking rates and length of grazing period. In order to achieve this some of the monitoring will be undertaken by the farmers or stock managers. In order to give guidance to the successful S9 Pilot scheme applicants two Forestry Commission workshops were held in Crianlarich and Muir of Ord in December 2005 led by Meg and I in partnership with Nick Mainprize of FCS.

So what will the future hold for the WHWGP? The Steering Group will take forward lessons learnt from the workshops we have held, paying particular attention to the need for a "practitioner-centric" approach, and also the requirement to develop a truly long term approach to the delivery of public benefits from woodland grazing. We aim to hold a series of practical site-based visits on woodland grazing over the next 12 months and possibly develop a dedicated Woodland Grazing website. Both of these projects, however, rely on securing adequate funding.

With the launch of a new Rural Development Regulation in Scotland and the introduction of Land Management Contracts here, one of the challenges for 2006 will be to demonstrate how habitat mosaics, which native woodlands in particular are a part of, can be managed in a holistic and integrated way, within the confines of future grant support mechanisms.

If anyone is interested in receiving copies of the proceedings for the 2004 and 2005 Woodland Grazing Workshops and the newsletters or would like to be kept informed of future events please contact me.

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Lucy Sumsion  
Argyll FWAG  
C/O Ardkinglas Estate  
Cairndow  
Argyll PA26 8BH  
Tel & Fax: 01499 600113  
E-mail: argyll@fwag.org.uk

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